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ABSTRACT

Even though linguistics has freed us from misconceptions, we have continued to seek answers to usage problems primarily by looking to linguistics. The myth of the verbal authority of standard speakers has given way to the evaluation of statistical frequency of forms. No matter how extensive or accurate the statistics, they must still be followed by a rhetorical choice as to which form is "correct." Usage questions do exist, and choices do make a difference, but they form only a very minor part of rhetoric. Real basics of composition, like putting a decent sentence together or developing a thought beyond the level of cliche, are more important than the subtleties of usage. (RS)

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USAGE AS RHETORIC
(CCCC, Philadelphia, March, 1976)

Robert M. Gorrell

I developed some awareness of the social potentialities of language at a fairly tender age. I was occasionally allowed to be present for the preliminary pleasantries when the ladies of my mother's bridge club gathered. A standard opening thrust before the serious gossip got started, was "Well, what have you been doing?" And the answer, with becoming modesty, was likely to be, "Oh, I haven't really did a thing all week." I knew the origin of this particular linguistic nicety because I was at the time under the wing of the same Miss Toole who had been the fifth-grade teacher of most of the ladies. I could recall how a classmate of mine had insisted to Miss Toole that he didn't know who done it. He got his palm walloped with a ruler, not because he really knew, but because he had used done rather than did. He stayed after school to write fifty times on the blackboard, "Did not done." None of Miss Toole's products took chances with done.

At about the same time I had shifted Sunday Schools and discovered something of the possibilities of shall and will. The school superintendent, when he prayed, which was frequently, had developed an ecclesiastical shall, "We pray that the Lord shall bless us and it shall be good." The virtuosity of these shalls contributed most to the efficacy of prayer preceding a meal, when it was regularly accompanied by another effect. My teacher, who had also taught the superintendent, in addition to her anti-done crusade, had views on pronunciation. Tiusday was more elegant than Toosday, niu than noo. The superintendent's grace always ended "And tiu, O Lord, bless our feud." At a neighbor's house the food, or feud, itself was affected by another part of my teacher's campaign for precise pronunciation, for a full-bodied rendering of the -ing suffix. It was going not goin, getting, not gittin. And for Sunday dinner, especially if the minister attended, it was chicking not chicken.

I have, of course, learned since that matters of this sort are much more significant than I imagined. Usage or pronunciation can kindle fires as readily as politics or religion and inspire even more self-righteous indignation. I remember a neighbor of mine some years ago bursting with outrage at the vulgarity of some newcomers to the

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town; they said "you-all" and "we-all" instead of "you-uns" and "we-uns."

These reminiscences seem especially vivid today because I think I detect in the current popular solicitide for Johnny's writing and the call for a return to basics a good deal of nostalgia for Miss Toole and her system. I sense a tendency to identify basics as superficialities of usage and to suggest that the remedy for Johnny's problems is a little more law and order--a ruler on the knuckles perhaps, to rescue whom or lie from the dangers of extinction.

And so I want to take another look at usage, because I think we should not forget what we have learned in the past half century. My thesis is simple and not new: usage is not a question of grammar or linguistics or morality, but of rhetoric. I think we have not looked very seriously at the implications of identifying usage as an aspect of rhetoric; I want to try to do so.

Linguists these days are not very seriously concerned with questions of usage, except through studies of dialect. They shy away from de ision about the relative virtues of It is I or It is me partly because they recognize that almost anything they say is likely to be misunderstood, partly because they recognize that such matters are not their main business, and partly because they have better things to do. But it was increased knowledge--or half knowledge--of the findings of linguistics that produced in this century new attitudes. As teachers and writers learned more of what linguists had known for a long time, the myths that had sustained usage decisions began to fade. Although the myths still attract zealous believers, the faith has been seriously shaken.

Among the most persistent of the myths is the myth of logic, the notion that language consistently follows patterns dictated by logical rules. The obvious example is the long-standing condemnation of the double negative by analogy with algebra and the assertion that two negatives make a positive. Another myth depends on word magic, the belief that words have power in themselves apart from their symbolic significance. Direct references to death are dangerous; four-letter words are immoral. Another is the myth of authority, the idea that experts--teachers, dictionary makers, grammarians,

good writers--dictate what is correct--presumably as custodians of special knowledge about the ideal language--Latin in the eighteenth century. This concept was the main support of the doctrines of prescription and proscription that dominated textbooks and schoolrooms for many years. Related is the myth of purity, the belief that contact as a verb or finalize debases the currency. With the obvious difficulties of deciding at just which stage in its development the language was pure, pure English tends to be my English. Perhaps more a rationalization than a myth is the evocation of clarity as a justification of particular choices. But it is hard to maintain that "I ain't brang nothing home" is less clear than "I haven't brought anything home."

Linguistic knowledge exposed the inaccuracy of all of these, and left the English teacher on a limb without a tree. The reasons for much of what the teaching of English had become had disappeared. Teachers still saw a difference between "what the cat drug or brang in" and "what the cat dragged or brought in." Dialect studies could describe the difference but not give them reason for choosing one rather than the other. Many teachers simply ignored linguistic fact, renewed their faith in the old gods, and kept to their comfortable if ineffectual way of prescription. Others shared in the popular misunderstanding that linguists were saying "anything goes" rather than describing facts, and dropped the entire usage business. Others accommodated to the new awareness of how language works by justifying usage choices on the basis of new doctrines that did not so obviously contradict facts about language.

The doctrine of appropriateness has been perhaps the most popular. It was introduced in America early in this century, particularly by George Philip Krapp,[1] and developed primarily by linguists, who were seduced by criticism into making explanations they did not need to make. The concept identifies standard usage as that recognized and accepted as customary in any particular community. The advocates of appropriateness talked about usage as a rhetorical concept--"language is valuable only as it effects the purpose one wishes to attain"--but used it mainly to develop descriptions of language. In particular, the doctrine produced the notion of "levels" of usage,

[1] Modern English (New York: Scribner's, 1909)

each with different areas of appropriateness. John S. Kenyon, in an often reprinted article, refined the doctrine, distinguishing "functional varieties" from the "levels," which had gained wide textbook popularity.[2]

[2]"Cultural Levels and Functional Varieties of English," College English, 10 (1948), 30-6.

The doctrine of appropriateness had critics almost from its first presentation. I. A. Richards, in 1938, had it as his main target when he spoke of "mere usage" as "the most pernicious influence in current English teaching, doing more than all other removable errors together to inhibit the course of self-critical and profitable reflection about the conduct of thought in language."[3] Richards insists that there must be

[3]Interpretation in Teaching (New York: HarcourtBrace, 1938), p. 174

normative standards based on the potentialities of the language and the skill of the user, but in his discussions he frequently sounds like the eighteenth-century grammarians he is attacking. His suggestion of a doctrine of the linguistic norm, however, was accepted, with qualifications, by Charles V. Hartung, after a careful survey of the doctrines popular in 1956.[4]

[4]"Doctrines of English Usage," The English Journal, 45 (December, 1956), 517-25.

None of the doctrines has gained full acceptance, and linguists tend to deplore the emphasis on levels because the very term implies a ranking. But attempts continue to categorize locutions and specify which are appropriate for which occasions. In the 1950's A. S. C. Ross gained some popularity for his terms U and non-U, to distinguish "upper-class" and "non-upper-class." In the late 1930's C. C. Fries started a series of extensive surveys that produced interesting information about how the language actually is used.[5] More recently the editors of the American Heritage Dictionary[6]

[5]American English Grammar (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1940).

[6](Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969)

selected panels of the "best" users of the language and compiled their opinions on particular usages. This kind of survey relies in part on the old myth of authority;

"good" English is what "good" users of the language use.

To summarize, then, linguistics effectively exposed the absurdity of early myths and doctrines of usage by showing that they were founded on false information. But we reacted by seeking new doctrines, based on better information, but still viewing usage as primarily language study. That is, we have continued to try to classify expressions, and to assume that the goal of such classification is some kind of respectability ranking. We are still tacitly assuming that getting better usage labels will solve all problems. In spite of our linguistic sophistication we still act as if we are dreaming of a new scientifically sanctified "correct" and "incorrect." We are trying to regain confidence like Miss Toole's, so that we can outlaw one expression and prescribe another, but with sounder information to back us.

The mistake is in the basic attitude toward usage. We misinterpret information and descriptions as precepts. The surveys of usage, the attempts at labels, are of course useful. The company a word keeps is an important part of the information any user of the language needs. But the linguistic information is not the end. It is only a preliminary to the rhetorical decision.

And this gets me back to my thesis, that usage is a matter of rhetoric, not of linguistics. Questions of usage occur only when alternatives are available. The choice, like any other rhetorical choice, depends on anticipating results. We choose one expression over another not because it has some kind of social standing or is appropriate or is used by the best writers but because we predict that it will have the effect we want. A carpenter cuts a two-by-four with a saw rather than a razor blade not because the best carpenters do or because a saw is somehow better but because the saw is more efficient for the particular job.

The distinction that I am making, I think, is more than a theoretical quibble. It is a necessary preliminary to any progress in thinking about usage. Problems of usage do exist. They are not very important. They tend to get magnified, to divert attention from more important aspects of handling language. But ignoring them will not make them go away. And a first step in approaching usage problems is to recognize that they are rhetorical. This recognition has important implications.

One of these is that choices customarily identified as usage problems are essentially like other rhetorical choices. Choosing between "He done good" and "He did well" is not different from choosing between lie and prevaricate or between "The racquet hit the ball" and "The ball was hit by the racquet." All the choices require the writer to consider how the reader will react--which expression will communicate more immediately, which will distract the reader least, and so on.

Another implication of the rhetorical approach is that individual questions of usage are likely to be more complex than attaching a label to an expression. Picking the abridged dictionaries that happen to be on my desk I find the much-discussed ain't with three labels: Colloq, substand, and illit and dial, the latter the most popular. Probably any of these can be justified, but knowing them does not tell us whether or how to use ain't--unless one interprets the labels as general prohibitions, which is the coward's way out. The labels do not solve the choice problem.

In other words, usage labels or other facts about language--and this is the most important implication of viewing usage rhetorically--contribute useful knowledge to any rhetorical choice, but do not automatically make the choice. Information about who uses an expression when is useful, but only as it is applied rhetorically. And this involves the whole relationship between rhetoric and language study.

If we consider rhetoric as the art of making choices among available alternatives, we need two kinds of information. We need to know all we can about available alternatives. Language study and grammar are therefore useful not only as general liberal arts studies but also as practical aids in using the language. The more we know about an expression, the more wisely we can decide whether or not to use it. Even etymology can help, but not because we are going to insist that the meaning of unique cannot change because of its origin or that dilapidate can mean only "scattering stones." We need to know all we can about the reputation of ain't, but that knowledge alone will not make decisions. We also need to have the best possible basis for making our choices, and therefore need to try to anticipate results. To

guess with any accuracy about results, we consider what we want to do--to impress or shock or persuade or confuse or inform an audience. We also need to consider what the audience is like--how it is likely to react--whether it is a small group of friends or a classroom of students or a broad general reading public or the subscribers to a scientific journal.

Consider an example or two, beginning with a simple one. If I were talking to a group of farmers in a small midwestern town would I say ēther or īther. I could rely on some linguistic information--that both pronunciations are recorded in dictionaries, that īther is more common in some parts of the East but not in the Middle West, that it dominates on the stage and among most television announcers. But I would also know that my audience would not notice if I said ēther but would if I said īther. They might simply conclude that I came from a different part of the country; but if they happened to know that I did not, or if the rest of my speech betrayed that I did not, they would think that I was trying to show off. If I used the pronunciation ĭther, which some of them would use, some of them at least would think that I was making fun of them or being condescending. Actually, of course, I would not think about it at all, because it is not important, and would use ēther because I always have.

Or consider "Who did you see?" and "Whom did you see?" Linguistics could supply a good deal of information. It could explain the grammatical considerations--that whom represents one grammatical device of the language that marks functions with inflection, and that who fits a later tendency to reveal syntax by word order. It could explain that both alternatives appear in both speech and writing in most geographical areas and among both educated and uneducated users of the language, and it could provide some statistics on frequency of each use. I could even get a sampling of what so-called best users of the language do by checking the American Heritage Dictionary, where I would find that 68% approve who for speech and 13% for writing. I would not know, however, which use was "correct" or which to use in any context. I would know that if I wrote "Who did you see?" a considerable portion of the sorts of people on the Heritage usage panel would look down their noses at

me. And if I cared about that particular kind of squinting, I might write whom, although I might also decide that I wanted to present a different image and was more concerned about readers who might consider whom affected or unnatural.

Prejudices of this sort are part of the factual knowledge that needs to be recognized in making any usage choice. They may not be justified, but they exist. I happen to dislike contact as a verb and facility for a building and to try to preserve the distinctions between disinterested and uninterested and infer and imply. These prejudices have no status beyond my personal taste--they are having no effect on the development of the language--but they are miniscule facts that can affect a usage choice.

Attempts to solve usage problems by labeling and classifying, then, seem to me not sufficient to solve problems. No matter how extensive or accurate the statistics may be, they provide only information that must still be followed by a rhetorical choice. And at worst, when the significance of the classifications or the warnings is misunderstood, the labels can lead to the kind of false elegance I mentioned a few minutes ago. The problem with "He invited my wife and I or myself to dinner" is not that it is ungrammatical or unclear. Rather it reveals too transparently the writer's panic in the presence of me. The phony pretention of the political subjunctive is another illustration--"If it be war they are seeking . . ." But it may be that the exaggeration is the effect the speaker wants.

My contention, then, is that even though linguistics has freed us from misconceptions and has not pretended to provide a new mythology, we have continued to seek answers to usage problems primarily by looking to linguistics. We have given up authority but tried to substitute statistics. By recognizing that usage is rhetorical rather than linguistic we can make intelligent use of the facts that linguistics provides. We can realize that the message of linguistics is not anything goes, that usage questions do exist and choices make a difference, but that deciding what goes is a rhetorical problem. And we can then get usage questions into proper perspective--as a very minor part of rhetoric--and get back to the real basics of composition like

putting a decent sentence together or getting ideas into a plausible sequence or developing a thought beyond a cliche.